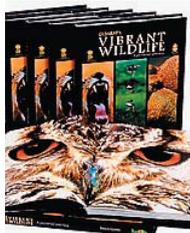


Pictorially speaking...



GUJARAT'S VIBRANT WILDLIFE: A PICTORIAL JOURNEY
Diinesh Kumble
Commissionerate
of Information,
Gujarat
2011, pp 192
₹ 1,495

With its 'mouth' opening through the Gulf of Kachchh, a neck set in the hills of the Dangs, and a curved 'jaw' housing the most populated districts dangling over the Arabian Sea, the shape of Gujarat looks like the head of an animal, and a smiling one at that. Within the limited geographical scope offered by the administrative boundaries is, however, a surprising diversity of landscapes, ecosystems, and wildlife.

With a rich array of photographs and a notable paucity of text, Kumble's book aims to take the reader, or rather the gazer, on a journey through this state in this book published with the support of the Government of Gujarat. It has the blessings of no less than its Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, with whose message the book opens on a page opposite a photograph of, of course, a lion.

The book is organised rather loosely as chapters on five major habitats: grassland, wetland, forest, marine, and desert. Within each, there is about a page of text, the rest is all photographs and captions. As an introduction to Gujarat's wildlife (names of species are also accompanied by Gujarati names, although not in Gujarati script), the book has some limited success, and some extraordinary failures.

The book is redeemed in part by many colour photographs, and the printing quality is excellent. The images, mostly of mammals and birds, are mostly those taken by the author, with some by his wife Chris Romila Kumble, and a sprinkling

from other photographers: Devesh Gadhi, Umeed Mistry, and Sumer Verma. Most photographs are crisp portraits — close-ups of the sort that one gets with vibration-reduced large lenses with wide-open apertures — with the background and foreground fuzzy. The images captivate, but lack depth, literally and figuratively, on the living landscapes and plants that sustain animal life. The chapter on forests, for instance, lacks photographs of any forest type. Adding a few such images to accompany each chapter would have helped.

Transcending the field-guide type portraits that the book is filled with are a few images that stand out in terms of composition, inspiring a touch of awe, a sense of nature wild and free. Such are Mistry's underwater shots of turtle and whale shark, Gadhi's image of lesser agama, and a few photos by the author and his wife, such as the sepia-toned spread of wild ass, flamingos in flight, and a pan of a jackal running.

Where the book really stoops low in quality is in the text. Almost uniformly poorly written, it includes some blandly-stated incomprehensibles such as "Forests are veritably the laboratories of life where co-operation and zero-sum games are seen in the raw" and "When it finally appeared but for a fraction of a second before disappearing behind the rocks, it was definitely worth a thousand words".

The captions of the images again read like field-guide material, often repeating the colours of the animal self-evident in the photograph. Captions for a few full-page images appear to have been overlooked. There is little on ecology, and even less on conservation in the book, to provide an interpretive context. The book would have benefited if the photographic skills of the author were combined with the knowledge of a field biologist who could also write well.

Were all the photos taken in Gujarat and of free-ranging animals? The portrait of a lion that the book opens with looks suspiciously like a much-photographed individual from an enclosure in Gir. Seeing images of foxes and hyenas photographed

near dens, and of a leopard running in broad daylight, one also hopes that the photographer used due diligence to minimise disturbance to animals.

There is also nothing worthwhile about conservation in this book, although the introduction claims that conservation is a 'living ideology' in Gujarat, epitomised by its lions. The sorry state of the Asiatic lion, reduced to a spectacle for tourists inured to the sight of habituated and hustled lions lying about their vehicles in a small area of Gujarat, a fraction of its original range, is not discussed.

Still, the book, published by the State Government, can hardly mention the blinkered intransigence of Gujarat to allow the establishment of another population in an identified reintroduction site in Madhya Pradesh, can it? In today's context, lions are no more the pride, they are the shame of Gujarat.

Similarly, there is nothing about the Dangs and forest loss and fragmentation, nothing about pollution and bleaching threatening the coral reefs, and certainly nothing about Gujarat's race to urbanise and industrialise and its consequences on the environment within which its people live.

To be fair, conservation is not the main theme of the book, but by ignoring conservation, peoples, and land uses in Gujarat, the book is one among many that succeeds in conveying an impression of wildlife and nature as objects, as colourful curiosities that one goes out to see, and constrained to remain within protected areas ordained for them (the maps in the book only show Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks).

Metaphorically speaking, the book succeeds in capturing this feeling and message through its images. Stilt and stork, gharial and hedgehog, nightjars and sandgrouse, they are all clipped, snout or beak to tail-tip, as tight portraits. There is little space, no vista. The images suggest a circumscribed view of wildlife in Gujarat, like closeted jewels in a locked jewel box.

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